



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

New roadways to a new capitol city

Alexandria Times, September 10, 2015

Image: Virginia Title Co. map, ca. 1900. Courtesy, Alexandria Library.

For decades after Alexandria was founded in 1749, the town was somewhat isolated in the frontier of North Virginia, with few transportation routes into the growing settlement. But with the designation of land from parts of Virginia and Maryland for the new national capital in the 1790s, more formal routes were needed to expedite the anticipated traffic to the new city from the south.

On April 27, 1808, Congress approved a bill to establish the Washington and Alexandria Turnpike and Bridge Company, which was directed to construct a road between the two cities, both of which were to be joined within the District of Columbia. The new roadway, which largely traversed the route of an old Native American trail that ran parallel to the Potomac River, entered Alexandria along present-day Powhatan Street, and connected to the former dead-end terminus of North Washington Street. That same year, a new highway was begun to connect Alexandria with Richmond to the south across the wide expanse of Great Hunting Creek.



For years the open fields north of Alexandria saw little development, with only small farms, the public Almshouse and periodic horse racing facilities dotting the landscape. But in 1854, after the former Virginia lands of the District were ceded back to the commonwealth, the General Assembly authorized the Turnpike Company to sell land parallel to its right-of-way to the Washington and Alexandria Railroad Company, assuring that the corridor would become one of the East Coast's primary transportation routes. But just as Alexandria's economic engine began to expand, the intervening Civil War and post-war stagnation precluded major growth in the area for nearly 30 years.

In 1888, two real estate speculators from Ohio came to the eastern United States cities to replicate two successful, planned communities, known as Branch Hill and Hazelwood, which they had built just outside Cincinnati. By 1894, partners Charles Wood and William Harmon had acquired land west of the parallel turnpike and rail routes outside Alexandria for new residential communities within a stone's throw from employment opportunities in D.C. and the emerging industries servicing the nearby rail lines.

The builders marketed their new Del Ray and St. Elmo developments to young families, as seen in this 1900 map by Virginia Title Co., relying heavily on the use of restrictive covenants.

Although commercial uses were allowed to be spread out through the communities, the legal covenants restricted many parcels for residential use, with a minimum construction cost of \$800 per dwelling by 1902, and largely excluded noxious industries and drinking establishments then prevalent in the West End that might mar the quality of life of the new residents.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Regulations regarding building set-backs of 70' on the 25 feet on the 25 foot by 105 foot and the placement of out-buildings were strictly enforced. Neighborhood streets were laid out to mirror Alexandria's grid-style, but set at a different angle to provide easy access to the adjoining turnpike corridor.

A large boulevard, Mount Vernon Avenue, was set aside as a wider thoroughfare to show off the larger, more ornate homes of wealthier residents. Graded streets, sidewalks and trees were also advertised as amenities within the new communities, which quickly attracted scores of new residents.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.